

Excellent and Respectful Reviewing: Improving the Field of Project Studies and the Quality of Our Research

Project Management Journal
2025, Vol. 56(5) 547–556
© 2025 Project Management Institute, Inc.
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/87569728251377554
journals.sagepub.com/home/pmx



Jonas Söderlund¹, Giorgio Locatelli², and Joana Geraldi³

“This is an irretrievably dreadful article. The data are sparse and banal, the interpretation is so biased as to be utterly implausible, and the whole lot is wrapped up in the most willfully obscure, pretentious waffle that half-way through the introduction I honestly thought that this was a spoof article.” (Quote from an anonymous review)

“What a waste of paper. /.../ The paper is a lot of cliched drivel.” (Quote from an anonymous reviewer)

The Importance of the Peer Review Process

The peer review process is an essential part of the academic system and critical to ensuring high-quality research. The system is widespread all over academia, although it plays a particularly central role for making informed decisions on publishing academic research in scholarly journals. Over the years, the peer review process within academic journals has been growing in importance, owing not only to the increasing number of submissions—including the number of submissions to the *Project Management Journal*® (PMJ)—but also to the increasing diversity in topics, theories, and methods. This makes reviewing both increasingly important—and more challenging.

Reviewers provide essential support to editors to evaluate and develop manuscripts into high-quality contributions. The peer review process is critical for most academic journals in business and management, including PMJ. To ensure high quality in our reviewing process, PMJ has made several moves to improve the review system and ensure a steady flow of new reviewers and high-quality reviews.

First, we have taken measures to increase our pool of reviewers. We have changed the editorial review board and invited new members from different parts of the world who will diversify theoretical and methodological expertise. We have also improved the categorization of expertise among our reviewers and defined up-to-date knowledge areas to ensure an even better fit between papers and reviewers. While we are proud of the review board we attracted so far, we will continue our efforts to expand and strengthen our network of reviewers, ensuring that we have the best

reviewers supporting our journal and informing the decisions we make.

Second, we have ensured that reviewers, including our editorial board members and our authors, are committed to delivering high-quality reviews to the journal. We do this by explicating the expectations of our review board members and continuously engaging with our reviewers to make sure they stay committed to delivering good reviews on time. We do this also by providing feedback to our reviewers and engaging them in various activities to improve their expertise as reviewers, such as various reviewer workshops together with the other project management journals.

Third, we have launched several initiatives to improve the quality of scholarship in project studies, especially targeting young scholars and newcomers to the field of project studies, including the PMJ College (which is now recruiting a new cohort), Meet the Editors sessions at conferences, such as EURAM, IRNOP, and the Academy of Management Annual Meetings, and various publication webinars and paper development workshops (such as those organized by our guest editorial teams). We have also engaged in conversations in various settings about the role and quality of peer reviews, which have encompassed several editorials on reviewing such as this one. Our recent editorial on “Authors, Reviewers, Editors” published in PMJ is one example of such a contribution where we not only attempt to engage in a broader conversation across different fields within management and organization studies but also explore unique challenges facing our own areas of knowledge.

The overarching goal of these initiatives is that PMJ becomes the preferred journal that offers the best reviews for our authors and, most importantly, ensures that their submissions will improve through the review process. Our aim is that anyone interested in contributing to project studies should consider

¹ Linköping University, Sweden

² Politecnico Milano, Italy

³ Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Corresponding Author:

Jonas Söderlund, Linköping University, Sweden.

Email: jonas.soderlund@liu.se

PMJ as the place to go to ensure high quality and improvements of clarity in ideas, making papers both more relevant and more rigorous, and reviewers serve an important role in upholding and strengthening our aim.

Reviewing is not only important to our authors, helping them to produce better manuscripts, it is also a practice that is instrumental to reviewers and editors—to foster what we refer to as a “generative conversation” that grooms project studies and beyond (Geraldi et al., 2025). We believe reviewers and reviewing are essential to building the new project studies community we think is needed to build the next generation of project management research, as an interdisciplinary field with scholars with diverse backgrounds and interests (Locatelli et al., 2023).

Yet, the review system faces both challenges and opportunities. The premises for our work and publication system have changed, the workload has increased along with the pressure of publishing, and the technological landscape is also very different (Dobusch et al., 2025). These are all factors that require careful scholarly scrutiny, debate, and action. We need to discuss the opportunities that come with these developments, as well as the challenges. We need to engage in a scholarly conversation about what we should do within our field—and what PMJ should do as one of the most prominent journals in it. In that respect we should discuss how we can make reviewing an integral part in advancing our field and improving our research.

This editorial therefore addresses some of the challenges associated with succeeding with this overarching goal of “making papers better” and “making PMJ a central force in the project studies community.” It is also then more narrowly intended to highlight some future challenges in getting people to review for our journal and ensuring reviewers submit good reviews. Thus, this editorial is a way to stimulate debate and sharing of ideas about these issues and address how we might make reviewing better for project studies in general and PMJ in particular. Our main point is that the review process is a critical activity in the development of academic knowledge, and hence, an intrinsic part of research. Therefore, reviewing is not only a gatekeeping process, but also an essential research activity that enables articles to connect, contribute, and impact the existing body of research. Let us now address some of the challenges facing the peer review system.

Challenges to Developmental Reviewing

One of the most important conversations in recent years concerning the role of peer reviewing for academic journals has been the notion of “developmental reviewing” (Lepak, 2009). This was an idea that gained prominence in the leading management journals, especially championed by editors representing the journals of the Academy of Management (Lepak, 2009; Ragins, 2015, 2017).

The general idea behind this movement was that reviewing needed to be transformed from only providing negative feedback, certifying the scientific quality of the paper, to actually helping authors develop better ideas, do better research, and

write better papers. Reviewing was reframed not only as a gatekeeping decision recommendation system, but also gradually more central to improving authors and research—to steer the focus of research and improve quality of research in the long term. The role of the reviewer thus became more extensive. Besides offering editors advice on whether to accept or reject a paper, the work included engaging deeply in a conversation with the authors about how their paper could be improved and sharpened, offering authors a chance to improve their ideas and writing beyond the paper at hand.

However, despite various efforts to promote developmental reviewing in our field and beyond (e.g., Saunders, 2005), malpractice persists in management and organization studies, as witnessed in the above quotes taken from actual examples from reviewer reports. Moreover, many journals face challenges in recruiting qualified reviewers and ensuring high review quality, despite the significance of the review process in improving publication standards. Reviewer engagement is increasingly challenging to secure as reviewers are, as most academics, busy juggling funding proposals, research and publication demands, and various other professional duties. Reviewing certainly takes time and effort yet is not recognized and hence easily deprioritized among other demands. Finding capable reviewers and committing them to do an excellent review is a challenge for PMJ and a problem that faces scholarly communities more widely beyond the business of publishing (Dobusch et al., 2025). To a greater extent, it seems, some authors are unwilling to participate in this system and when they do, they refrain from offering developmental reviews (Lewin et al., 2014; Dobusch et al., 2025). Obviously then the route ahead is to get authors to see the value of reviewing—and doing this well in the interests of the field, PMJ, and the authors.

The precarious state of the reviewing process carries significant consequences, given the reviewers’ crucial role in upholding the quality and legitimacy of publication decisions. If the review system breaks down, can we continue to place trust in the publication procedure and its outcomes? Probably not. This is why the PMJ review system editors have dedicated a series of editorials about the peer review process (see e.g., Geraldi et al., 2025). We at PMJ—together with the other journals in our field and their respective teams of editors—work hard to develop and maintain an insightful, relevant, and rigorous project scholarly community that fosters conceptual contribution, clarity, and growth. Such a community depends on a well-functioning peer review process. It depends on a generative and engaging conversation; a collaboration among editors, authors, and reviewers during the review process, sometimes lasting more than a year from initial submission to the acceptance of a paper. In fact, most of the papers accepted at PMJ have been in the review process for at least 12 months, going through at least two rounds of revisions. This is similar to other leading journals in management and organization. We are aware that there are “scientific journals” belonging to dubious publishers (if not predatory) where the time between first submission and acceptance is just a few weeks. We do not think that this is a

credible or advisable practice, unless the goal is to become a paper mill maximizing profits through authors publishing fees. This is not an area in which we want to compete.

We argue that for the review process to function effectively, authors, reviewers, and editors must work in unison—they must work together to form what we have referred to as a “generative conversation” that offers new value or meaning that makes papers and research scientifically sound and insightful. Such conversations involve a direct and honest sharing of ideas and knowledge that would not have been created individually. Such conversations move papers in the right direction toward publishing better papers, but they also move our research in the right direction—toward the right questions, addressed in the right way. They represent conversations that will make papers stronger and, not the least, more relevant and interesting to our readers and our research community. However, to make this conversation successful we need not only to address the role of reviewers, which has been done already by Geraldi et al. (2025) and in various editorials for other journals (Dubousch et al., 2025; Lepak, 2009), but to raise some wider concerns and future challenges that have emerged in recent years, including those of using AI.

With this editorial and other initiatives recently launched, our goal is to promote the significance of peer reviewing, working toward improving the quality of reviewing and the benefits of reviewing. We address some future opportunities and challenges, including those related to the use of AI for reviewing. We also introduce a new award that PMJ will be launching—Outstanding Reviewer—which we hope will improve reviewing quality and recognition for our journal and reviewing quality in our field more generally.

We next describe some current PMJ practices and what the journal has done to maintain a developmental and high-quality peer review system. We then continue by pointing out some challenges associated with being a reviewer and our thoughts on how these challenges could and should be handled.

The PMJ Peer Review Process

PMJ was founded in 1969 and initially published papers by both academics and practitioners. Over time, it has become a full-fledged academic journal; in the past 20 years, it has been dominated by academic authorships and also targeting the practitioner community in its readership. Consequently, the importance of peer reviewing has also increased considerably (Söderlund & Bakker, 2014). Today, the peer review process is an integral part of the journal’s operations and one of the most challenging matters we as editors are currently facing. Reviewing practices also play a key role for the journal to be recognized as a leading journal within the business and management studies communities.

At PMJ, the peer review system is essential to improving submissions and ensuring we make wise and well-founded publishing decisions. This ambition has become increasingly important during the recent decade. This means that the

conversations that unfold in the peer review process play a prominent role in defining and developing the nature and character of the field of project studies—what it is and where it is going (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018). This means that the review process has a role to play not only for the papers we actually publish but, beyond those, to ensure young scholars choose to publish their work in project studies/project management journals—not only because they get recognition and readers from it, but also because their research improves from it.

Today approximately 80% of the papers submitted to PMJ are desk rejected by our editors-in-chief or any of our handling editors. This means that less than 20% of the papers are sent out for review, and approximately half of those sent out to review will be accepted. We certainly aim to send as many submissions for review as possible, but we avoid using our scarce reviewers’ time on papers that are unlikely to pass even the first round of reviews. The main reasons for a desk rejection have been addressed in other editorials (see, e.g., Klein & Muller, 2022). Still, a reject decision typically relates to the lack of relevance of the topic and actual contribution to project studies, weak rigor of methods, theoretical development, or lack of sufficient argumentation. There are also several good editorials in other journals, where editors and experienced reviewers highlight the most common reasons for a rejection decision (Daft, 1983). However, we need to be careful and ensure a healthy balance in our desk-reject process; as handling editors, we might miss things that reviewers could spot and gems we were not able to detect.

The peer review system is one of several important systems for improving scholarly writing and publishing. There are many other ways we could help authors develop their ideas and writings, including workshops to stimulate feedback on research ideas, paper development workshops, and various seminars at universities to aid the publication process. The peer review process in journals is, however, not the only practice in which we could help authors become better in writing and scholars to develop their research ideas, but it is one important part of the entire research system in this respect. We believe journals need to be even more active in aligning with these other systems to ensure we do not overuse the peer review process for purposes that might be better handled in other ways.

We try to be as transparent as possible about how we handle the papers submitted to PMJ. Our reviews are always double-blind, which means that neither the reviewers know who the authors are, nor do the authors know who the reviewers are. Additionally, the reviewers do not know each other; the only person who can see the names of the people involved is the editor. All authors are treated with respect and as equals. We encourage our authors to write their paper so their identity is not revealed, not only by not adding their names, author details, and acknowledgments into the manuscript but also in the body of the work when they, for instance, by explicitly referring to their work.

Similarly, experts who receive the reviews should not know who the reviewers are. They would know who the editor is,

because all decision letters are signed by one of the editors working for the journal. However, reviewers are referred to as Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2, or Reviewer 3, and their identity will not be revealed during or after the reviewing process after. If the paper is accepted and then published, the reviewer might identify the authors at that moment, yet the names of the reviewers will always be confidential. Blind reviews are essential, but they also come with certain drawbacks of dehumanizing the interaction between authors and reviewers. This drawback might make it challenging to recruit reviewers as they do not receive explicit recognition of their work and contribution to the field (however, every year we publish a list of PMJ reviewers, thanking them for their work)

Although it is well known that the peer review process is far from perfect, the alternatives are worse. Winston Churchill famously said that “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” (Winston Churchill, speech in the House of Commons, 11 November 1947). We think similarly about the review process, but we believe it works (most of the time), as the papers we publish have benefited from the review process. Many authors send us feedback on the review process—witnessing the substantial, often even transformational improvements of the paper thanks to the reviewers’ comments.

Our anecdotal experiences are also confirmed in various reflection pieces of the publication process, as indicated in a forthcoming edited book by Stewart Clegg and Julien Pollack (Clegg & Pollack, 2025). The book offers an insightful look into the research and publication process behind outstanding academic work. It takes readers behind the scenes of published papers, featuring commentaries from authors, peers, and occasionally even editors. A recurring theme throughout the essays is the pivotal role of the peer review process, which the authors highlight as a critical factor influencing the final published work (Lenfle & Söderlund, 2025).

Our experience from publishing in this and other journals points in the same direction. We have all had papers moving from what we thought were pretty good papers to actually very good papers (see Lenfle & Söderlund, 2025, for a description of how a paper moved from early draft to publication thanks to constructive comments from the reviewers and editor). This is, however, a tricky game to play. On the one hand, we want authors to submit publishable papers that could be published as submitted, but we also want papers to develop throughout the review process. Our ambition is that all authors who submit their papers to PMJ and go through the peer review process should feel their papers have been treated fairly, improved, and benefited from feedback from editors and reviewers so the published paper is better than the submitted paper. We also hope that authors, particularly early career scholars, learned something important during the

review process, something that is not only confined to that particular paper, but which is relevant for their future research and scholarly writing.

Working with the reviewers, building the network of reviewers, and helping reviewers do a thorough job are key duties for all PMJ editors. We know that we are competing with other journals in this regard, not only concerning the actual quality of the papers published, but equally in the quality of the reviews delivered. Good reviewers are critical for publishing good papers and, thus, for maintaining our high standards and ambitions of establishing PMJ as a leading journal in the field of management and organization studies. This will help ensure we are regarded as the leading academic journal in project management. If PMJ can attract even better reviewers, authors doing quality research will be even more interested in submitting their papers to our journal. Next, we address the fundamental issue of why a scholar should review for PMJ.

Why Review for PMJ?

Conducting a review is a significant commitment in terms of the time spent and as a service to the community (Söderlund, 2023). Unfortunately, the reviewer’s work often goes under the radar, invisible and rarely considered for career progression. Senior colleagues would be (on the surface) opportunistically correct in advising younger scholars to focus on their publications as opposed to spending time reviewing the work of others. After all, spending a lot of time on invisible and rarely recognized work in a fiercely competitive market seems unwise. Therefore, we cannot afford not to ask the most obvious question: Why should a busy scholar—like any of us—spend hours, sometimes days, reviewing the work of others? In particular, why should a junior academic who might be struggling to get tenure invest their precious time on reviewing rather than focusing on their own research/teaching? This issue is a popular topic addressed in various editorials elsewhere (see, e.g., Treviño, 2008). Synthesizing those and our own experiences, we highlight five key reasons why we think reviewing is particularly important in the context of PMJ.

Reason 1: Develop your own thinking and writing. Although less visible, taking on the burden offers many benefits for the individual scholar and the wider academic community. Senior scholars, including the PMJ editors, have reaped the benefits of their extensive review process experience. However, it is crucial to articulate these advantages more explicitly, given the often hidden nature of their insights. One of the primary reasons to actively participate in a review process is the opportunity to stay abreast of the latest developments in our field. By reviewing manuscripts submitted by fellow scholars, scholars may gain valuable insights into current work in progress, new publications, recent methodologies, emerging findings, and discourses in our field. Due to the lengthy timeline between journal submissions, peer review, and eventual publication, most academic articles reflect ideas that are already one to

two years old. As a result, relying solely on published work provides a delayed view of the field and may leave readers unaware of the most recent theoretical developments, emerging debates, and shifts in scholarly thinking. Moreover, while it is unethical to “steal ideas” from fellow scholars, it is legitimate (and advisable) to learn about, for instance, a new theoretical approach and apply it in a different context or discover a new methodology and include it (e.g., in a grant application).

Reason 2: Learn from the mistakes of others. Additionally, peer reviewing contributes significantly to honing one’s writing skills (Carpenter, 2009). Evaluating the work of others not only exposes reviewers to diverse writing styles but also prompts them to critically assess the clarity, coherence, relevance, and robustness of academic work. This hands-on experience can be instrumental in refining one’s abilities to articulate ideas and present research findings compellingly. Helping others carve out a contribution often improves one’s ability to work out captivating contributions. This goes with the old saying: “It is important and good to learn from your mistakes, but it is far more convenient to learn from someone else’s mistakes.”

Reason 3: Develop your understanding of the publishing process. Furthermore, engaging in the peer review process provides an invaluable opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of how scholarly articles are evaluated and improved. One learns not only from one’s own reviews but also what other experts have read and understood about a particular paper—and how the editor has drafted an editorial letter, summarizing and pondering different comments, resolving contradictions among reviewers and the like. It also provides insights into the development of a paper and making a good paper even better. This is a craft that scholars will need to develop throughout their entire careers. Taking part in reviewing the work of others is an excellent opportunity to learn more about these things.

Regular readers are only exposed to the final product, in other words, the published article. Being involved in the reviewing process shows how manuscripts progress whereby authors, with the help of reviewers and the editor, develop their ideas, increase clarity, strengthen arguments, and craft better theoretical contributions. This insight is particularly beneficial for early career researchers who may be less familiar with academic writing and publishing intricacies (e.g., how to respond to editors and reviewers).

Reason 4: Support the community and advance the field of project studies. Actively participating in the peer review process signifies a dedication to the scholarly community and specific journals and may, over time, also open doors for career progression (Ragins, 2018). Recognizing the challenge of attracting and retaining reviewers, journals have been working to create more appealing incentives for reviewers, including membership on editorial review boards of journals and best reviewer awards. The PMJ editorial team actively seeks individuals who show commitment through reviewing roles, with the potential to advance to PMJ review boards and

even join the editorial team (<https://journals.sagepub.com/editorial-board/PMX>). Such roles enhance one’s skills and contribute significantly to career development. Dobusch et al. (2025) highlight the role of reviewing as a “practice of care” for the scholarly community, which points out a key aspect of development toward engaged scholarship.

Reason 5: Receive recognition and build your professional network. Recent developments, such as the launch of Publons reviewer recognition system, now associated with the Web of Science, further enhance the recognition of reviewers. This platform verifies and publishes the reviewing process, providing reviewers with due credit and increasing the overall transparency of the peer review process. At PMJ we will be launching additional initiatives to improve our pool of reviewers, update our reviewer databases with additional keywords and reviewer performance, and of course the support we give to our reviewers, including the feedback that we give to our reviewers, and launch various activities that make our reviewers even better at reviewing. At various conferences, we participate in Meet the Editors’ sessions where we are given the opportunity to talk to authors and reviewers of our journal about key things in the review process.

AI and the Review Process

As discussed in earlier editorials, artificial intelligence (AI) is a key factor in the new publishing process, including its review process (Geraldi et al., 2024). As AI technologies, such as large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT advance, their role in academic publishing has raised important debates (Geraldi et al., 2024). The potential of these tools to assist in the peer review process raises several ethical and practical concerns about confidentiality, intellectual property, and the quality of the review itself. This has profound implications for management journals such as PMJ, which, as we stated earlier, heavily relies on the peer review process. Indeed, as a journal, we need to balance innovation and caution: Although AI can certainly be a powerful aid for our authors and reviewers, we must maintain our high standards to protect the integrity of our review process.

At PMJ, we allow authors to enhance their written text, its clarity, grammar, and syntax by using AI-based software for language editing (e.g., Grammarly and ChatGPT). This is a comparable modern version of the old approach of paying a proofreader (or asking a colleague or friend to proofread), which is an accepted and standard practice in academic publishing. However, the content must remain the author’s original work, reflecting their ideas and interpretations. As with proofreaders, it is (or maybe was) the author’s job to check that the proofreader did not change the meaning of the text.

Yet, a fundamental difference exists between using AI during the research process (including writing the paper) and the review process: Authors own the intellectual rights of the text until the manuscript is accepted for publication. This means that they are the ones with the right to decide whether

and how to use AI (or a proofreader). When authors choose to upload their paper to LLMs like ChatGPT, they are taking (consciously or not) a confidentiality risk on their own intellectual property. Neither the journal nor the reviewers have the right to make this choice on behalf of the authors. Crucially, uploading someone else's paper is a totally different matter.

Once the manuscript enters the review process, the editors and reviewers must remember that they are managing someone else's intellectual property. This places them in a unique position of trust, which requires respecting the intellectual property and the confidentiality of the authors' unpublished research. Therefore, uploading a manuscript submitted to PMJ to LLMs to review a manuscript is at present *strictly prohibited*. Even uploading specific manuscript sections to AI platforms has severe risks of privacy breaches and intellectual property exposure that we cannot accept. This firm boundary reflects our commitment to protecting the intellectual right of our authors, the integrity of the review process, and the journal itself. If an author suspects that a review is AI generated, we ask them to contact the handling editors and/or the editors-in-chief. They will then investigate the case and eventually follow up with the reviewer.

Boundaries are blurred in other cases; therefore, we have developed the following guidelines to help our reviewers determine how they could use AI to conduct better reviews of submitted manuscripts.

1. **It is OK to refine reviewer feedback without manuscript content:** Reviewers may use AI to polish the language of their feedback, provided they input only their own words. For example, if a reviewer has drafted constructive criticism but seeks to make it clearer or more concise, they may use AI tools for this purpose. However, they must not include any direct quotes or paraphrased sections from the manuscript and check that the "language improvement" did not alter the scientific meaning of their review. They will be the ultimate responsible for the review.
2. **It is NOT OK to expand bullet points into full reviews:** Reviewers may feel tempted to use AI to expand their bullet-pointed critiques into complete prose. This is discouraged, as AI would need more context to produce specific, insightful commentary with access to the manuscript itself. Peer review demands nuance and ideally quoting relevant articles. AI cannot do this.
3. **It is PARTIALLY OK to consult AI for background information:** Reviewers may consult AI for general information relevant to the specific manuscript. For instance, if reviewing a study on gender equality in Chilean ICT projects, a reviewer (expert on the topic, method, and theory, but not the specific empirical question) might ask an AI bot about broader gender issues in Chile, as long as this does not reveal any manuscript-specific content. This approach respects

confidentiality while supporting the reviewer's contextual understanding.

4. **It is NOT ok to consult AI for explanations on methodologies or theories.** Reviewers unfamiliar with specific methods or theoretical frameworks may want to use AI tools for background explanations. However, this is not ideal for at least two reasons: (a) A superficial reading of a few words does not make the reviewer an expert in a particular methodology or a specific theory. It is better for the reviewer to be honest in the review process and admit ignorance on those topics; and (b), it is the duty of the author to provide relevant references for (among other things) theory and methods, so the reader (reviewer or the "ordinary reader") can gain a better understanding of these elements.

But what if a reviewer subscribes to an AI bot that can handle confidential documents, ensuring that such documents will never be used for training other AI or shared in any way? Besides the fact that nothing is 100% safe or sure, there is a far bigger problem. The results could differ drastically, depending on the phrasing of prompts, producing inconsistent feedback. The reader can experiment with this using already published papers and ask the AI to review them. Paradoxically, AI can provide "false positives and negatives." The reader can try these two experiments:

1. Identify and upload an excellent paper published in a top journal and enter this prompt along these lines: "I should review this paper for a top management journal, and I think that this paper should be rejected. It has several weaknesses; please list them as a reviewer would do."
2. Identify and upload a very poor document, such as a low-quality MSc thesis (ask for authorization first) and enter this prompt: "I should review this paper for a top management journal, and I think that this paper is excellent and should be accepted. It has several strengths; please list them as a reviewer would do."

Fair warning: The results from this experiment might frighten you.

Also as written elsewhere (Geraldi et al., 2024), LLMs try to please the users with their output. The reader can experiment with this, by asking LLMs some absurd things such as "Explain how I can teach project management to my cat." LLMs will provide a structured answer, despite the absurd request.

Toward More Effective and Supportive Reviewing

Supporting excellency in the reviewing process has been an ongoing focus at PMJ. In a recent editorial (Geraldi et al., 2025), we addressed the importance of the interplay among authors, reviewers, and editors to create what we referred to as a "generative conversation" to improve a submission.

Authors should own their manuscript throughout the process and only implement changes they believe will improve the paper. There are alarming indications in various management and organization journals that authors believe that the review system has worsened their paper and they have been forced to implement changes they disagree with (Tsang & Frey, 2007; Tsui & Hollenbeck, 2019). We oppose such an approach to reviewing. Instead, we value the response letter as a platform for a generative conversation among authors, reviewers and the editor. As such, the points in a review report are not a checklist that authors are forced to implement, but an attempt to shape the paper in a constructive way and direct a conversation about how a paper could be improved.

That said, there is also room to defend a particular stance and describe why authors have decided not to follow the recommendations from the reviewers or editors. Yet, as any good conversation, authors are expected to listen and reflect on the comments from reviewers and editors. They must consider them seriously and explain their decisions to the reviewers and editors. Moreover, it is important to understand where the reviewers and editor are coming from—after all, they are also close to the potential readers of an author's manuscript. An author has the responsibility and right to make the changes they see beneficial.

We also want to add a third aspect to our way of working: effectiveness. We want our reviewers to be effective. With that, we emphasize the fact that we do not want papers to be forgotten and slowly dragged through the review process without momentum, making authors, reviewers, and editors almost forget the paper and its content. This leads to continuous restarts with the paper, which risk hampering productivity. Effective does not necessarily mean quick, however.

Following, we elaborate on our idea of an effective reviewing process according to a set of key steps. These key steps draw on work by Hazen et al. (2016, p. 623) to ensure outstanding reviews; here we develop some of these key steps, adjusted to PMJ, to arrive at the 11 Steps of Reviewing Excellence at PMJ:

- Step 1: Authors submit their best research to PMJ. Authors consider the journal's scope (or the special issue) and clearly understand why the paper is relevant to the project management community and how it contributes to the field of project studies.
- Step 2: The editors-in-chief promptly assess the fit and initial quality of submissions and assign a handling editor who is an expert within the content of the paper. The editor sends the paper to three competent reviewers who together will cover the topic, methods, and theory. The journal sends the paper out for review within four weeks.
- Step 3: Since reviewing is an implicit duty of the profession, reviewers accept the invitation without delay and then follow through, providing a timely, thorough, and constructive review. Reviewers deliver the reviews within four weeks.
- Step 4: Editors then compile reviews, synthesize the main points by reviewers, write up their assessment and summary, and make a decision that provides constructive feedback and clear guidance to authors. The editor makes the decision and writes the letter within four weeks.
- Step 5: Authors respond thoroughly and expeditiously to suggestions from the editor and reviewers, substantially revise the manuscript, using the comments as a platform but not a check list. The authors are given three months to complete the revision.
- Step 6: Authors respond to the editor's and reviewers' comments and prepare a detailed response letter that clarifies what changes have been made and submit a revised manuscript and response letter.
- Step 7: The handling editor decides whether to accept the paper or send it out for one more round of reviews.
- Step 8: The reviewers read the substantially revised paper and response letter and consider the other reviewers' main points and the authors' responses. The reviewers submit their final evaluation and remaining comments.
- Step 9: The editor puts together a final list of suggestions and sends the decision letter synthesizing the remaining issues with the paper and provides concrete suggestions on what changes are needed.
- Step 10: The authors consider the remaining issues and devise a plan for dealing with the final points, revise the manuscript, and write a response letter explaining the final changes. The authors then submit the final version and response letter to the journal.
- Step 11: The editor makes the final decision and recommends a decision to the Editors-in-Chief who look at the paper, make the final decision, and possibly add some minor comments before sending the paper to production.

Publishers pull resources together intending to inform reviewers about the reviewing process, such as Sage's Journal Reviewer Gateway (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal-reviewer-gateway>), which offers valuable videos and guidelines for reviewers. Yet, journals and academic communities vary, and such generic efforts might not be well-suited for all fields. Approximately a decade ago, there were some conversations about reviewing in management and organization studies. The Academy of Management has been leading the way in this regard, publishing a wide range of editorials on the subject; addressing manuscript format, writing, publishing, and reviewing in their main journals, the *Academy of Management Journal* and the *Academy of Management Review*. For instance, Carpenter (2009) and, more recently, Ragins (2017) have been pushing the envelope in reviewing. Not surprisingly, the website of the Academy of Management offers more tailored principles for reviewers (<https://aom.org/research/publishing-with-aom/reviewer-resources>). Resources are available—we just need to use them and will only be able to do so when we reestablish the reviewer's role as a legitimate and vital part of the academic knowledge production system. We need to give it more visibility and expect excellent work as we do in our publications.

The PMJ team certainly trusts you will accept your next reviewer invitation, work with us, and support our authors to move project studies forward and ensure we publish good papers—and better papers. We rely on our reviewers to engage authors in the generative collaboration needed for good reviewing. We have moved further toward developmental reviewing and for this to work, we need to move quickly. We will do more work in this area in the coming year. We are responsible for making decisions swiftly to ensure our review system works well and our reviewers deliver on time.

As mentioned earlier, it will not be unusual that papers submitted to PMJ will be rejected as mentioned earlier; however, with better guidelines, we hope the rejection rate will decrease; with a network of strong authors, the desk reject ratio will also go down. We thus hope that editorials such as this one, and editorials specifying what we expect from papers submitted to our journal, we should receive more papers that fit the scope of the journal and meet the initial quality standards for sending papers out for review (Müller & Klein, 2018; Müller & Klein, 2020a, 2020b). But what about those papers that actually move into the review stage? Are we envisioning a process lasting several years from initial submission to actual publication? For PMJ, which addresses topics that are not only central to the academic community but also of interest to managers dealing with pressing and sometimes urgent challenges, we believe there is also a need to handle the review process in the interest of time and timing. This means that editors, reviewers, and authors need to complete their review and revisions relatively quickly to ensure topicality and timeliness of our published papers.

In the developmental review process (Lepak, 2009) leading to the generative review conversation (Gerald et al., 2025), we should expect that a significant number of papers will require major revision, but we do not want papers getting stuck in the major revision trap. We expect our editors to make tough decisions and either reject papers after the first round or move the paper to a minor revision stage, clearly pointing out the changes and improvements needed. All things considered, we should be able to get a paper accepted within 12 months from first submission. This is the gold standard we trust to set for PMJ with the help of our authors and reviewers. We know that this rule might not apply to all our papers, but as a vision and ambition we think it could work for a majority of papers going through the review process. We certainly believe this could be a rule that could apply to papers submitted to our special issues in which we know timeliness is sometimes a very important part of impact and attention. This is why we have special issues in the first place.

Rewarding Excellent Reviewing

At PMJ we have decided to implement a few additional and recent improvements. First, as mentioned above, we will somewhat change the actual process of reviewing. We do not aspire to go into lengthy major revision processes but instead try to make a tough decision early in the process. However, we will

not jeopardize the developmental approach for the sake of speed. We only want to maintain a strong focus and good momentum in the writing and reviewing to ensure papers are moving forward in an integrated fashion, ensuring that reviewers remember the papers, reviewers maintain a focus in their approach to reviewing a paper, ensuring that papers are addressing topics that are timely and important to the journal—and contributing to a current debate in the journal. This also ensures not only quality, it also ensures that papers receive the attention they deserve. We want our papers to be read, seen, and acknowledged in an increasingly noisy landscape of academic publishing.

We also want to ensure reviewers who engage in the process of helping our authors move their papers forward receive the recognition they deserve. In summarizing the main guiding lights for effective and excellent reviewing, we have put together a set of inspiring keywords we hope can enliven the debate and make reviews even better. We would like to encourage our prospective reviewers to consider the RESPECT framework. This means that reviewers should ensure their reviews are:

- **Relevant.** Reviewers should consider the context for the review, the nature of the journal, the nature of the special issue, and the nature of the paper as such. This also means reviewers are always to some extent contextual—writing for and in a specific context. We hope our reviewers think about the journal that they are working with, what the journal thinks is important, and what topics and debates are currently prevailing within the context of the journal.
- **Enlightened.** We want our reviewers to think outside the box, and offer comments based on their experience and their personal reading of the paper. We want their reviews to give new knowledge to our authors and editors. In that respect, we also want our reviewers to make both editors and reviewers aware of problems they might have missed but also find things that authors were not aware of—making authors see more than only the limited focus of the paper and make them aware of how they could frame the contribution in a compelling way.
- **Structured.** We ask our reviewers to organize their review in a logical fashion. We suggest using headings and numbers to make it easier for us as editors to integrate different viewpoints from our reviewer, and for our authors to respond in the response letter. Instead of listing all the feedback in a ongoing flow of comments without structure mixing major points with minor points, we believe it might be better to clearly point out the major problems of the paper and present these points in a logical fashion. This could perhaps mean that reviewers might leave the smaller points out in the initial round to ensure authors are really understanding what is important and critical for the paper to move forward.
- **Polite.** This means that reviewers should be mindful about how they formulate their feedback. There is always a

human being behind each manuscript—a person who has worked for several years to develop the ideas and evidence presented in the paper. They deserve to be treated with respect and although there might be severe problems, weaknesses, and inconsistencies with a paper—these should be presented with respect and kindness. As pointed out earlier, there is a risk that the blind review process de-humanizes the feedback process. We want to emphasize that the review process is a highly human and considerate process. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

- **Effective.** Most journals appreciate effective reviewing. This is a relatively new concept, and the practice of effective reviewing is still very much a practice in progress. What is an effective review? First and foremost, we believe that reviewers should point out the most critical points, highlighting the major weaknesses, and address the most intriguing opportunities for improvement. This also means that reviewers should pay less attention to minor issues to ensure that authors focus on the most important things. This also means that we appreciate if reviewers provide comments that are directed directly toward the handling editor in a separate section (“Confidential Comments to Editor”), where reviewers clearly can elaborate on their decision recommendation. This section offers an opportunity for reviewers to add feedback that might not be easy to formulate in a way that would maintain the anonymity of a reviewer, for instance, providing examples of references to their own work. This also means advising reviewers not to explicitly state their decision recommendation in the comments to authors. This could also mean that the reviewer who has tended to be developmental and supportive explains in further detail to the editor why a particular decision recommendation has been made. We advise our reviewers not to voice their decision recommendation explicitly in the reviewer comments.
- **Constructive.** In the spirit of developmental reviewing contributing to the generative conversation, we ask our reviewers not only to point out weaknesses but also to explicate what they like about the paper, provide arguments for why the paper might offer a contribution, and so forth. For any inconsistency, problem, or weakness, we also ask our reviewers to be constructive and provide ideas on how to resolve these issues. This means referring explicitly to references that could help frame a particular problem, giving examples on how an issue could be addressed and resolved. It also means that reviewers could identify different options and thus also suggest which option they would favor and why.
- **Timely.** We hope our reviewers accept reviews and deliver their review on time. It might certainly be acceptable to offer substantial feedback in the first round and then focus on the narrower issues emerging in the second round—all for the sake of a timely review and

momentum in the review process. We should point out that we prefer to have the best reviewers rather than those reviewers who are available. However, we know that some reviewers are extremely busy and for that reason we may grant some extra time to allow reviewers to complete their reviews. However, once review invitations have been accepted, we certainly hope reviewers will be able to complete them on time.

To further develop excellence in reviewing, we have decided to follow a plan that many other leading journals already have implemented and that several conferences in the field of project studies have been subscribing to; namely to reward good reviewing. For example, several leading management and organization journals have awards for Best Reviewer or for Outstanding Reviewer. The EURAM Project Organizing SIG has had the Best Reviewer Award for quite a while, and the IRNOP Conference has from time to time also handed out Awards for Best Reviewer. It is also time for PMJ to implement such an award to recognize our fantastic reviewers and promote the generative conversation within developmental reviewing.

We have decided not to award the best reviewer but rather to award what we believe is an Outstanding Reviewer Award. Such an award is more inclusive. This could be for various reasons, such as long-time service as a reviewer; for specific assignments, such as doing multiple reviews for a special issue; or for doing other outstanding achievements as reviewer. We will also add to our editorial system a nomination for outstanding reviewing and the editors-in-chief along with the senior editors will officially make the decision. We will bestow this award along with the Best Paper Award in the summer 2026.

We trust this editorial will inspire more reviewers to get involved with our journal, continuously improve the peer-review process at PMJ, and help us realize the vision of outstanding reviewing. Along with the other journals in our field, we will launch a number of additional measures including reviewing workshops and paper development workshops to help raise the quality of our research—and ensure the review process contributes accordingly. Thank you all for your hard work publishing with and reviewing for PMJ—together we can make a difference!

References

- Carpenter, M. A. (2009). Editor's comments: Mentoring colleagues in the craft and spirit of peer review. *Academy of Management Review*, 34(2), 191–195.
- Clegg, S. R., & Pollack, J. (Eds.) (2025). *Doing exemplary project management research*. Elgar
- Daft, R. (1983). Learning the craft of organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 8(4), 539–546.
- Dobusch, L., Plotnikof, M., & Wenzel, M. (2025). Reviewing is caring! Revaluing a critical, but invisibilized, underappreciated, and exploited academic practice. *Organization*, 1–17.

- Geraldi, J., Locatelli, G., & Söderlund, J. (2025). Author, review, editor: A generative conversation. *Project Management Journal*. In press.
- Geraldi, J., & Söderlund, J. (2018). Project studies: What it is, where it is going. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36, 55–70.
- Geraldi, J., Locatelli, G., Dei, G., Söderlund, J., & Clegg, S. (2024). AI for management and organization research: Examples and reflections from project studies. *Project Management Journal*, 55(4), 339–351.
- Hazen, B. T., Fawcett, S. E., Ogden, J. A., Autry, C. W., Richey, R. G., & Ellinger, A. E. (2016). Addressing a broken peer review process. *The International Journal of Logistics*
- Klein, G., & Müller, R. (2022). Getting past the editor's desk. *Project Management Journal*, 53(6), 543–546.
- Lepak, D. (2009). Editor's comments: What is good reviewing? *Academy of Management Review*, 34(3), 375–381.
- Lenfle, L., & Söderlund, J. (2025). A ten-year transition journey into project-oriented agency and regeneration. In S. R. Clegg & J. Pollack (Eds.), *Doing exemplary project management research*. Elgar.
- Lewin, A. Y. (2014). The peer-review process: The good, the bad, the ugly, and the extraordinary. *Management and Organization Review*, 10(2), 167–173.
- Locatelli, G., Ika, L., Drouin, N., Müller, R., Huemann, M., Söderlund, J., Geraldi, J., & Clegg, S. (2023). A manifesto for project management research. *European Management Review* 20, 3–17.
- Müller, R., & Klein, G. (2018). What constitutes a contribution to *Project Management Journal*[®]. *Project Management Journal*, 49(5), 3–4.
- Müller, R., & Klein, G. (2019a). Qualitative research submissions to *Project Management Journal*[®]. *Project Management Journal*, 50(1), 3–5.
- Müller, R., & Klein, G. (2019b). Quantitative research submissions to *Project Management Journal*[®]. *Project Management Journal*, 50(3), 1–3.
- Ragins, B. R. (2015). Editor's comments: Developing our authors. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(1), 1–8.
- Ragins, B. R. (2017). Editor's comments: Raising the bar for developmental reviewing. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(4), 573–576.
- Ragins, B. R. (2018). From boxing to dancing: Creating a developmental editorial culture. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 27(2), 158–163.
- Saunders, C. (2005). Editor's comments: Thoughts on developmental reviewing. *MIS Quarterly*, 29(2), iii–xii.
- Söderlund, J. (2023). Seven insights into becoming an engaged project scholar. *Project Management Journal*, 54(5), 1–7.
- Söderlund, J., & Bakker, R. (2014). The case for good reviewing. *International Journal of Project Management*, 32(1), 1–6.
- Treviño, L. K. (2008). Editor's comments: Why review? Because reviewing is a professional responsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(1), 8–10.
- Tsang, E. W. K., & Frey, B. S. (2007). The as-is journal review process: Let authors own their ideas. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 6(1), 128–136.
- Tsui, A., & Hollenbeck, J. R. (2009). Successful authors and effective reviewers: Balancing supply and demand in the organizational sciences. *Organizational Research Methods*, 12(2), 259–275.